



## Homeward Bound: The Work-Family Reset in Post-COVID America

By: Wendy Wang and Jenet Erickson

**Editor’s Note:** *This report is co-sponsored by The Wheatley Institution.*

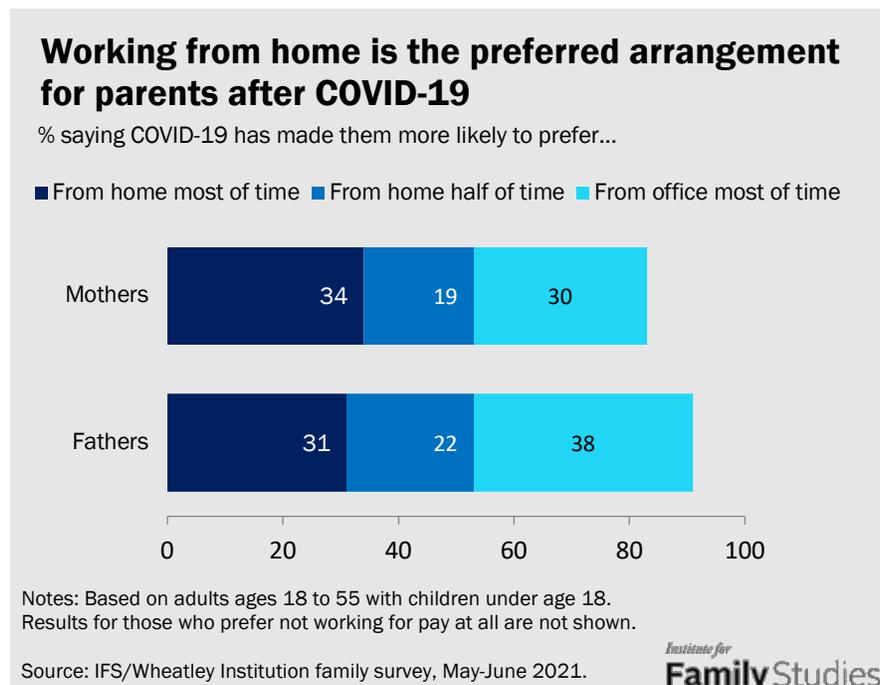
Despite all the chaos and struggles over the past year, the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic gave many parents the first-hand experience of working from home. And they like it.

Indeed, the possibilities in workplace flexibility created during the coronavirus crisis may have begun a reset in the way parents think about what they want in their work and family lives—a reset that looks “homeward bound.” More than half of parents with children under age 18 said that COVID-19 has made them more likely to prefer working from home, either most of the time (33%) or half of the time (20%), according to a new Institute for Family Studies/Wheatley Institution survey by YouGov.

These feelings are shared by both mothers and fathers. Over half of fathers said the coronavirus pandemic has made them more likely to prefer working from home (either full or part time), while only 38% said that the impact of COVID-19 made them more likely to want to work from the office.

Similarly, only 30% of mothers said the pandemic made them more likely to prefer working from the office most of the time. A majority (53%) of mothers would prefer to work from home most or half of the time.

This question was asked of parents who said that their ideal situation was to work. The rest of the parents (18% of moms and 8% of dads) said they simply prefer to not work for pay at all.



Some of this shift in desire reflects the fact that parents now see more options for possible ways to arrange child care. In the same survey, parents rated “both parents work flexible hours and share child care” as the best child care arrangement for families with kids ages 0-4. Mothers were more likely than fathers to prefer that option (37% vs. 25%). Having a stay-at-home parent is still popular among parents, with close to 30% of mothers and fathers believing that “one parent stays home full time to care for child” is the best arrangement for families with kids under age 5.

On the other hand, full-time center-based child care, the arrangement most often discussed in public policy proposals, was only favored by 11% of parents. Fathers were more likely than mothers to list full-time center-based care as the best arrangement for families with young kids (14% vs. 8%).

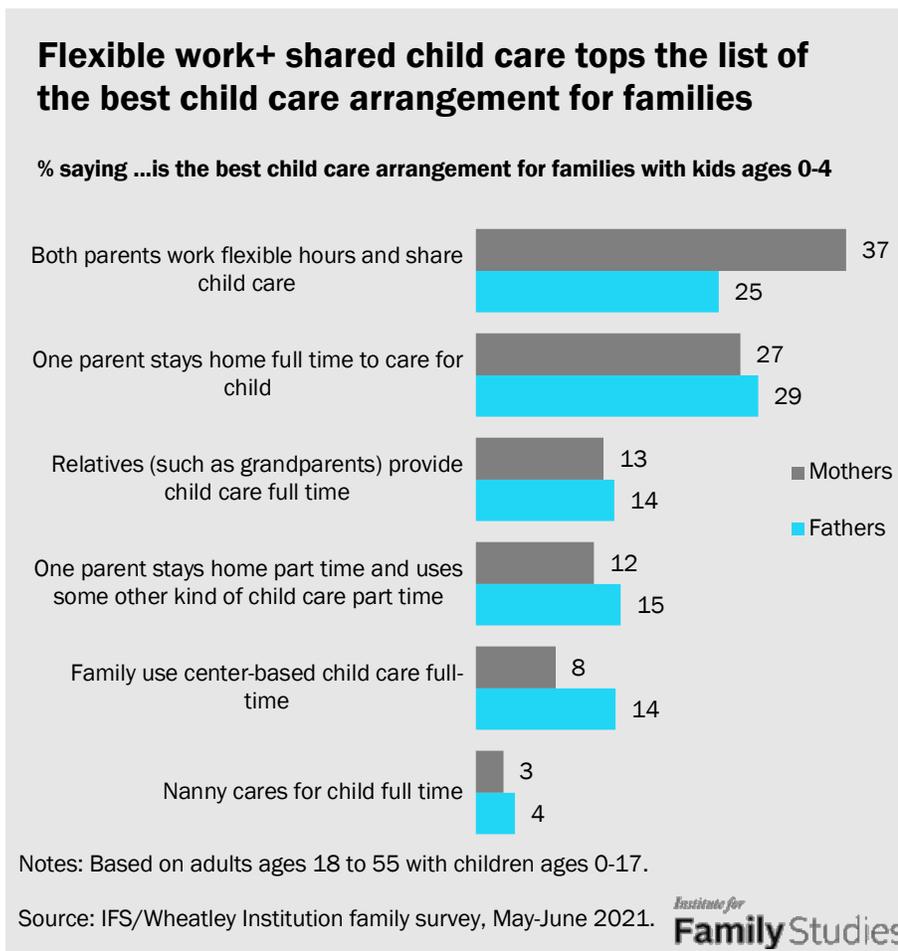
Working mothers, especially those who work full-time, were the group most likely to prefer the model of “flexible work plus shared child care.” More than four-in-ten mothers who work full-time endorsed this arrangement (42%), while 22% said one

parent staying home to care for the child is best. Only 11% of full-time working mothers said using center-based child care full time is the best arrangement for families with children under age 5.

These findings are based on a new Institute for Family Studies/Wheatley Institution survey of 2,500 American adults, ages 18-55, conducted May 28 to June 10, 2021, by YouGov.

Other key findings from the survey:

- The pandemic has changed many parents’ preference in terms of working full time, part time, or not working for pay at all. Fathers and mothers were equally likely to say the pandemic has changed their preferences, with a particular shift toward part-time work among certain groups. College-educated mothers were much more likely than non-college educated mothers to say COVID-19 has made them more likely to prefer part-time work (17% vs. 11%). On the other hand, COVID-19 also



makes part-time work more appealing for non-college educated fathers (15%) than college-educated fathers (5%).

- When it comes to working from home versus the office, college-educated fathers take the lead in endorsing working from home. A total of 65% of college-educated fathers said the pandemic made them prefer working from home either most of the time (44%) or half of the time (21%). The share is 45% for non-college educated fathers and 57% for college-educated mothers. College-educated fathers were also the group least likely to say they prefer not working for pay at all.
- For parents with children under age 5, a gap in the ideal versus reality exists mainly in two types of child care arrangements: “flexible work + shared child care” and the stay-at-home parent model. Some 30% of parents of young children said the best child care arrangement is having both parents work flexible hours and share child care, but only 18% of them currently use this arrangement. Meanwhile, the share of families with young children who currently have a full-time stay-at-home parent is higher than the share that believes having a parent at home full-time is the best child care arrangement (40% vs. 28%).
- Most families who currently have a stay-at-home parent (57%) are practicing what they believe is the best arrangement for their families. Some families with children under age 5 who currently have one parent at home full-time do have a desire for more paid work. However, instead of sending their kids to day care full time (8%), these parents were more likely to prefer working flexible hours and sharing child care responsibilities (23%).

#### **About the Data**

The Institute for Family Studies/Wheatley Institution survey was conducted by YouGov between May 28 and June 10, 2021, with a representative sample of 2,500 adults ages 18 to 55 living in the U.S., including 901 respondents who have children under age 18, and 293 respondents with children under age 5. A total of 2,709 interviews were completed and then matched down to a sample of 2,500 to produce the final dataset.

The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. Additional weighting adjustment was conducted to reflect the most current employment patterns observed in May 2021 Current Population Survey. The characteristics of the final weighted sample mirror those of the general population ages 18-55 in the United States.

## COVID-19 and Parents' Shifting Work Preference

The pandemic has presented unique challenges for parents. They either needed to take on the job of homeschooling their kids or help them handle remote learning, while still managing their own full-time jobs. In most families, moms handle the bulk of child care responsibilities. As a result, a [record number of mothers](#) of school-age children pulled back on work, triggering what some feared would be the world's first "[she-cession](#)."

Despite these concerns, employment recovery among mothers has been strong. In fact, by May 2021, 54% of mothers of children under age 18 were working full-time, a share that is comparable to March 2020 when the pandemic started and only slightly lower than what it was in January 2020 (55%). Fathers' employment followed a similar pattern: by May 2021, 85% of fathers worked full-time.<sup>1</sup>

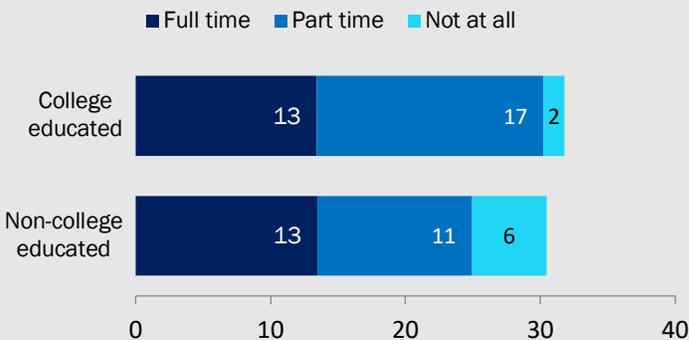
But the prolonged period of workplace flexibility for parents with children at home seems to have made some parents rethink their work-life preferences. About one-third of parents polled said the pandemic has changed their preferences.

Fathers (30%) were as likely as mothers (31%) to say that COVID-19 changed their work preference.

A possible "reset" in preferences seems to be particularly evident among college-educated mothers. Fully 17% of college-educated moms said the coronavirus has made them more likely to prefer working part-time, compared with 11% of mothers who do not have a college degree. Overall, part-time work was more popular than full-time work for mothers who reported a change of heart because of COVID-19.

### Part-time work is more appealing to college-educated mothers

% saying COVID-19 has made them more likely to prefer...



Notes: Based on women ages 18 to 55 with children under age 18. Results for mothers whose work preference didn't change because of COVID-19 are not shown.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution family survey, May-June 2021.

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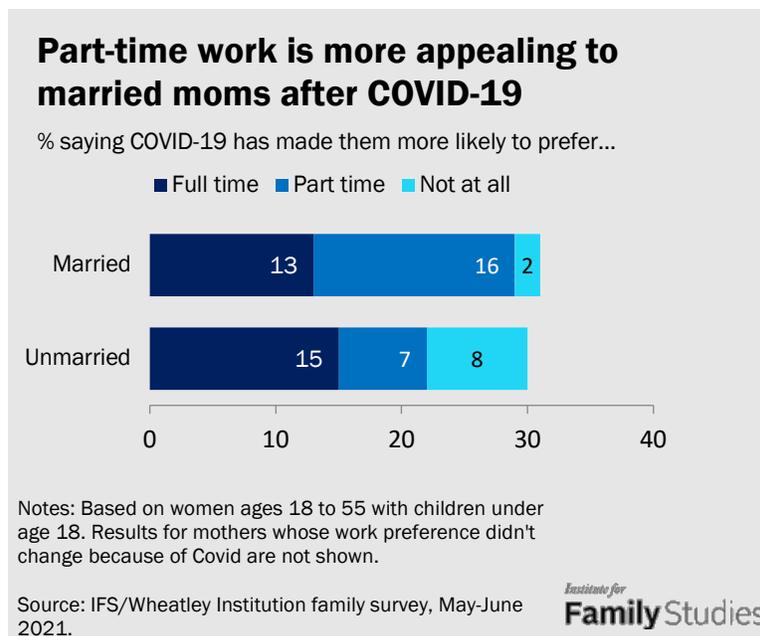
It's possible this shift reflects the same dynamic that journalist Judith Warner [described](#) a decade ago. She spoke to college-educated women who had chosen to opt-out of careers when they had young children. In the process, they described "greater appreciation of some of the values of home and connectivity" that can be "alien" in intensive, full-time careers. When they chose to [opt back in](#), they had a different ideal than they had before opting out—[in their words](#), "More time with their children combined with some sort of intellectually stimulating, respectably paying, advancement-permitting part-time work."

<sup>1</sup> Authors' analysis of Current Population Surveys Jan 2020, March-May 2020, March-May 2021, IPUMS. Based on parents ages 18-55 with children under age 18 at home.

Fathers' education levels work in a different direction. While 26% of college-educated dads said they are more likely to prefer full-time work because of COVID-19, only 12% of non-college educated dads said the same. Some 15% of non-college educated fathers reported being more likely to prefer part-time work because of the pandemic, compared with only 5% of college-educated fathers (*See Appendix for details*).

Marital status of parents is also associated with their shifting work preferences after the pandemic. Married mothers were more likely than their unmarried counterparts to indicate that COVID-19 has made part-time work more attractive to them (16% versus 7%). In contrast, unmarried mothers were slightly more likely than married mothers to suggest that the pandemic has made full-time work more appealing (15% compared to 13%). At the same time, the pandemic and its aftermath also made not working for pay much more appealing to unmarried mothers than married mothers (8% versus 2%). Married mothers may arguably have the most sense of “choice” in their preference because they are less likely to be the sole provider in their family. More choice is generally linked to a preference for part-time employment among mothers with children at home.

But married fathers were twice as likely as unmarried fathers to suggest that COVID-19 has made part-time work more appealing (12% versus 6%). At the same time, married fathers were more likely than unmarried fathers to say full-time work has become more appealing to them (18% versus 14%). As with unmarried mothers, unmarried fathers were more likely to suggest that COVID-19 has made not working for pay more appealing.



## Ideal Work Situation for Parents

When it comes to the ideal work situation, the views of fathers and mothers are quite distinct. The difference is most pronounced among families with children ages 0-4. A vast majority of fathers (80%) in this group prefer working full time, compared with only 35% of mothers. Mothers are much more likely than fathers to say they prefer either part-time work or to not work for pay at all.

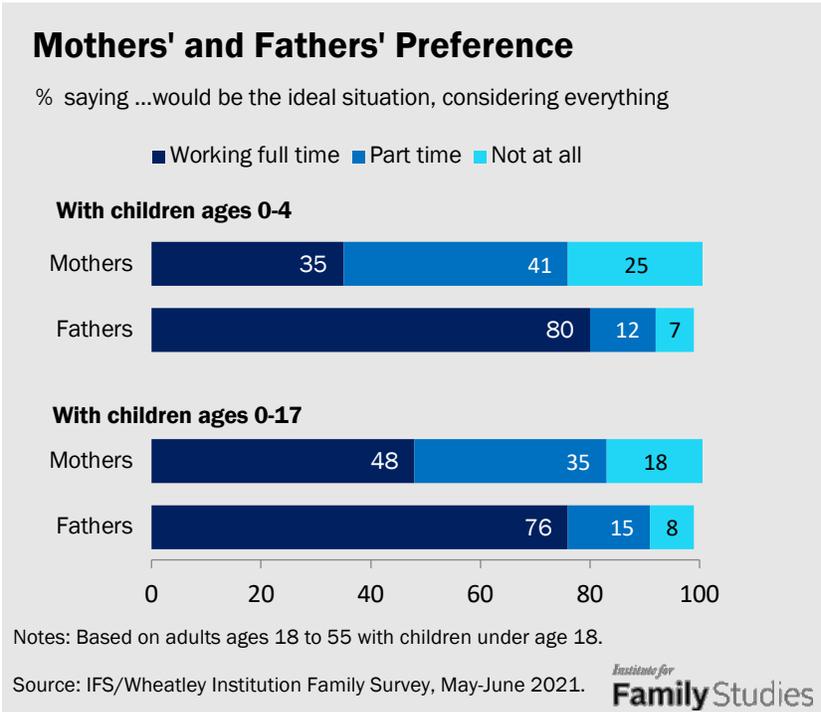
About 40% of mothers with children under age 5 said they prefer part-time work, making it the top preference for these mothers. A quarter of mothers

in these families also state that not working for pay at all would be their ideal situation. In contrast, only 35% of mothers with babies and toddlers said working full time is ideal. In contrast to some who claim a lack of child care “forces” women out of the workplace, these results suggest that mothers (and fathers) are making choices about what matters most to them, and that they actually prefer to pull back from work while their children are young.

In recent decades, mothers of young children have [consistently said](#) they [prefer](#) part-time or no employment over full-time employment. For mothers with children under age 18 overall in our survey, less than half (48%) said their ideal situation is to work full time, about one-third of mothers (35%) said they prefer working part time, and close to 20% said not working for pay at all is ideal.<sup>2</sup>

Married mothers are more likely to prefer part-time or no employment than are unmarried mothers, a pattern that is consistent with [previous surveys](#). More than half of married mothers (55%) said their ideal situation is to either work part time or not work for pay at all, compared with 45% of unmarried mothers. But for fathers, marital status works in a different direction: Married fathers were more likely than unmarried fathers to prefer working full time (79% versus 69%), and less likely to say their ideal situation is not working for pay at all (6% versus 15%). (See [Appendix](#))

College-educated moms, however, are much more likely than non-college educated mothers to prefer working part time and less likely to say not working for pay at all is ideal. Fewer than half of college-educated mothers (46%) said they prefer working full time; the share is slightly higher among mothers without a college degree. The pattern is almost reversed among fathers: Non-college educated fathers



<sup>2</sup> Because of the differences in survey mode, question wording, and respondents age, the findings presented here are not directly comparable to previous survey findings.

were much more likely than their college-educated peers to say they prefer a part-time job (20% compared to 8%), and they are also twice as likely as college-educated fathers to say they prefer not working for pay at all (10% vs. 5%).

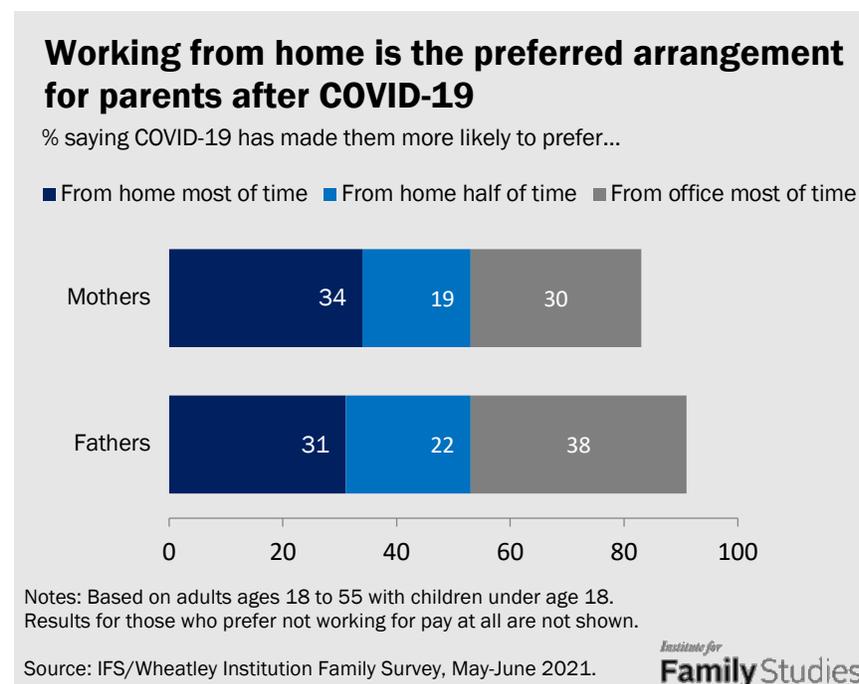
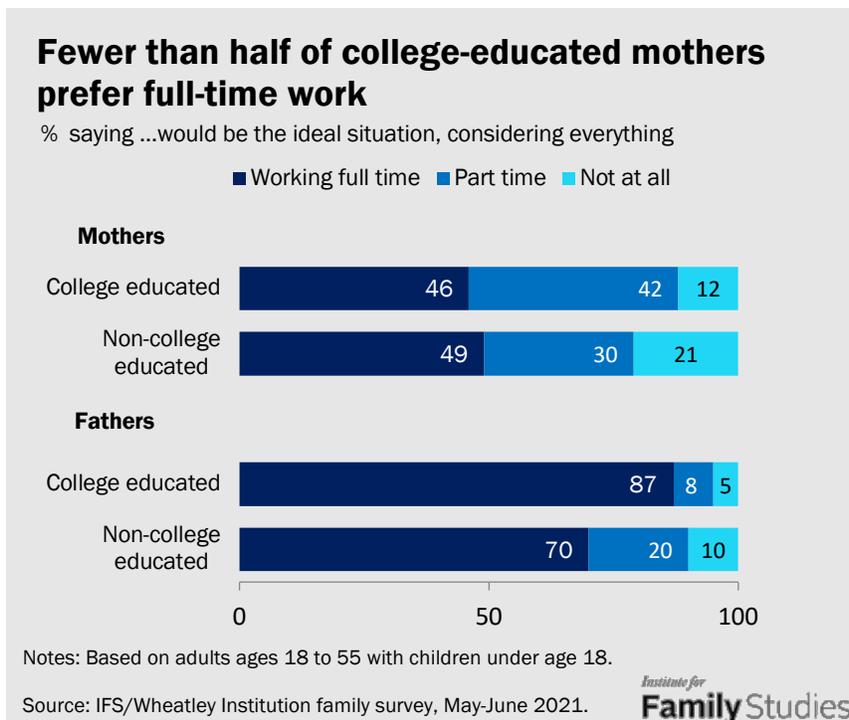
These work preferences are consistent with what parents said about how COVID-19 has affected their preferences. Whether these preferences remain in the post-pandemic world is something worth watching.

### Remote Work vs. Working from the Office

Work preferences are also shaped by flexibility in when and where work is performed. For many parents, the pandemic unlocked a previously unknown level of flexibility that some parents may have desired for a long time.

Almost two decades ago, 30% of a nationally representative sample of mothers in the [Motherhood Study](#) identified “working for pay from home” as their ideal, but only 1% were able to do it. Suddenly, the pandemic made that ideal a reality for many parents, and mothers, as well as fathers, liked it.

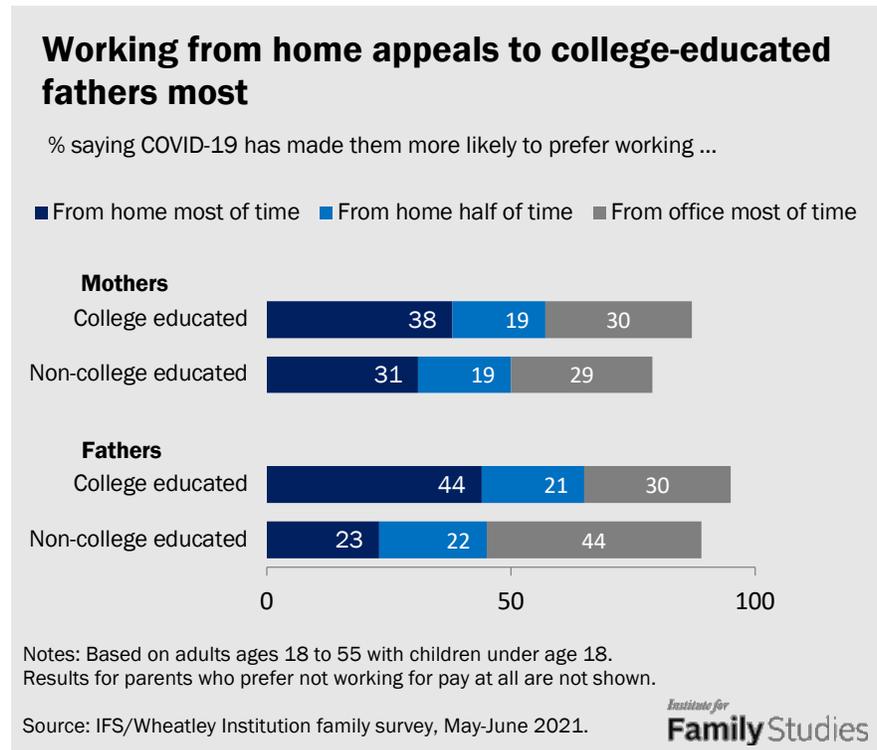
The new IFS/Wheatley survey suggests that working from home has become the favorite option for parents. An equal share of moms and dads (53%) said the pandemic has made them more likely to prefer working from home either most or half of the time. Only a minority of mothers (30%) and fathers (38%) said the pandemic has made them more likely to prefer working from the office most of time.



The pandemic seems to have swayed the preference of college-educated fathers the most: 65% of college-educated fathers said they are more likely to prefer working from home either most or half the time, compared with 45% of fathers without a college degree. Working from home most of the time is favored (44%) over the half-time remote work arrangement (21%) among college-educated fathers. Only 30% of these fathers said they are more likely to prefer working from the office most of time.

College-educated mothers are also more likely than their peers without a college degree to say COVID-19 has made them prefer working from home. More than half of college-educated mothers (57%) said they are more likely to prefer working from home either most or half the time, compared with about 50% of non-college educated mothers. The popularity of working at home for college-educated parents may partly be a reflection of the way in which their work is often easier to do remotely.

Working from home is also seen more favorably among parents whose ideal work situation is working part time. For both mothers and fathers who prefer part-time work, 76% said the pandemic has made them more likely to prefer working from home either most or half of the time. In contrast, over half of mothers and fathers whose ideal situation is working full time (55%) said they prefer working from home either most or half of the time.

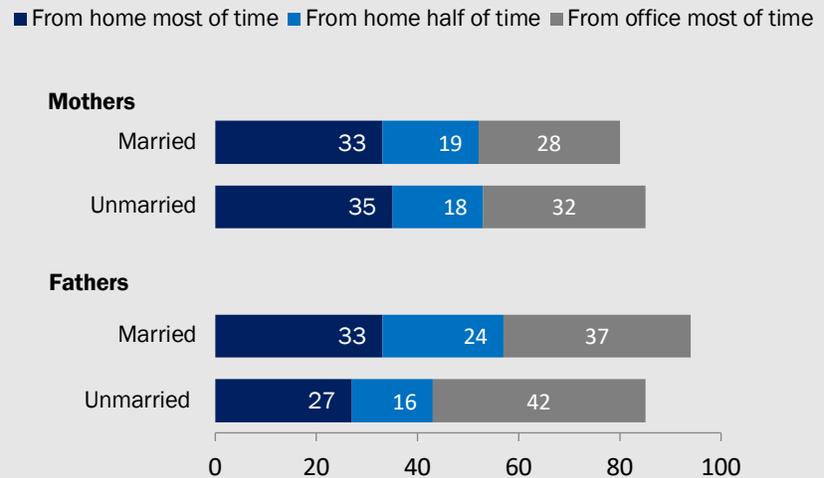


Mothers, whether married or unmarried, were about equally likely to say that COVID-19 has made them more likely to prefer working from home. But marital status matters for fathers' preference. Married fathers were more likely than unmarried fathers to say that working from home has become more appealing to them (57% vs. 43%), and only a little over one-third of married fathers (37%) said the pandemic has made them more likely to prefer working from the office most of time.

Some evidence suggests the quality of mothers' experience working from home during the pandemic differed from fathers. Mothers were much [more likely](#) to be interrupted during paid work hours while simultaneously trying to care for children. Yet high percentages of both mothers and fathers said they are more likely to prefer working from home since COVID-19.

## Working from home is especially appealing to married dads

% saying COVID-19 made them more likely to prefer...



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55 with children under age 18. Results for those who prefer not working for pay at all are not shown. Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution family survey, May-June 2021.

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### The Child Care Ideal vs. Reality Among Parents of Young Children

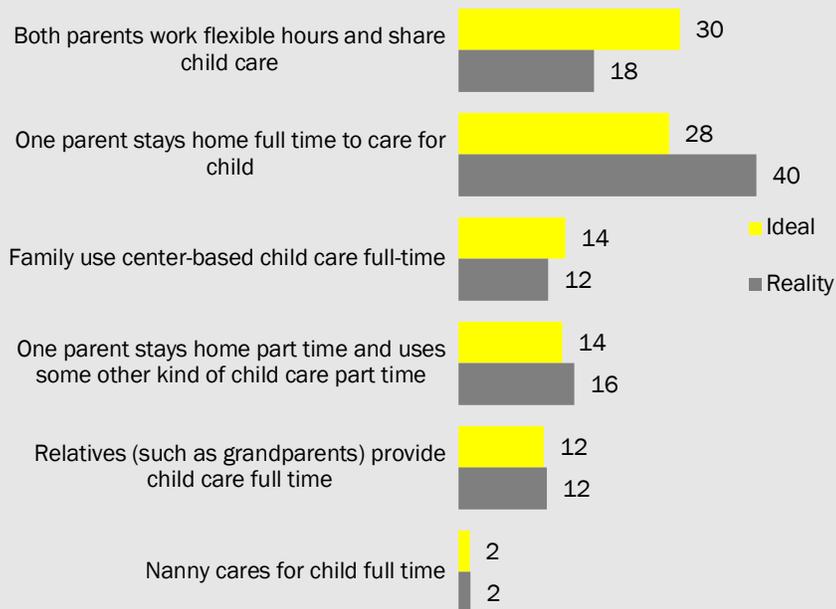
The Biden administration's American Families Plan has brought the child care issue to the front and center of the [debate](#), operating from the implicit assumption that lack of a federally funded child care is keeping mothers, in particular, from full-time work. There is no doubt that the cost of child care is high in the U.S. and helping families to better afford the cost could benefit many parents. But it is also important to know whether center-based child care is what most parents really want.

Among families with children ages 0-4, who are most likely to be impacted by child care policy decisions, full-time center-based care is only preferred by 14% of parents, according to the new IFS/Wheatley survey. Instead, a plurality of parents said they would prefer arrangements that allow them to care for their own children at home.

Indeed, the biggest gap in what parents want versus their reality is seen in the arrangement of both parents working flexible hours and sharing child care. Three-in-ten parents with children ages 0 to 4 said the best child care arrangement would be to have both parents involved in taking care of their kids via flexible work hours. In real life, only 18% of the parents are able to accomplish that ideal. On the other hand, one parent staying at home full-time is currently practiced in 40% of families with young children in our survey, though a smaller share of parents (28%) said that is the best arrangement for families with young children like theirs.

### Child care arrangements, ideal vs. reality, according to parents with children ages 0-4

% saying ...is the best child care arrangement vs. current child care arrangement



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55 with children ages 0-4.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution family survey, May-June 2021.

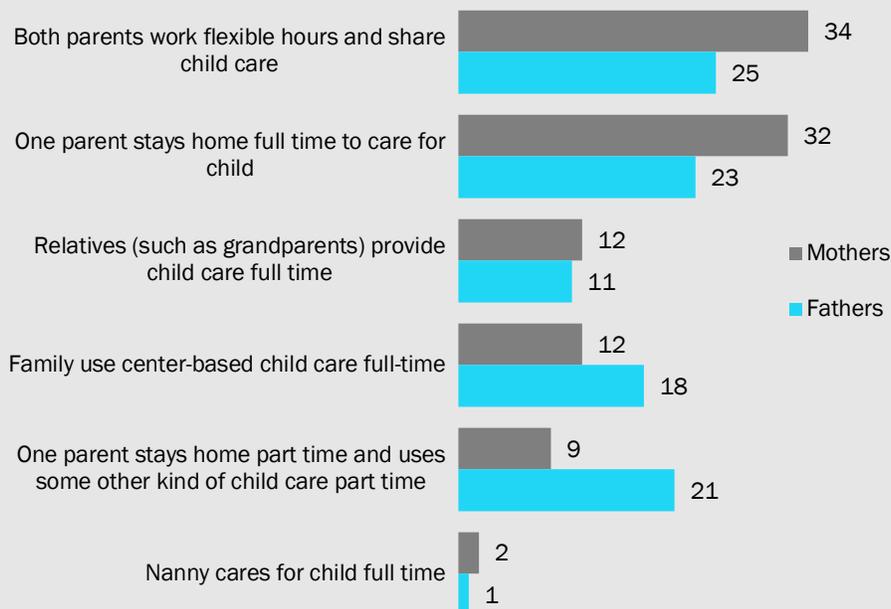
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These results suggest that there may be parents currently staying at home full-time who wish to work but would prefer flexible hours and sharing child care responsibilities with the other parent rather than placing their kids in full-time day care. In fact, among families who currently have one stay-at-home parent, 23% of parents said the best arrangement is the model in which both parents work flexible

hours and share child care, while only 8% said full-time center-based care is the best. Mothers of young children ages 0-4 were much more likely than fathers to prefer the model of both parents sharing child care and working flexible work hours (34% versus 25%). And they were also more likely than fathers to say having one parent stay at home full time is the best arrangement (32% versus 23%). On the other hand, fathers were more likely than mothers to say that using center-based child care full time is ideal (18% vs. 12%).

## Best child care arrangement, according to parents with children ages 0-4

% saying ...is the best child care arrangement for families with kids ages 0-4



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55 with children ages 0-4.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution family survey, May-June 2021.

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Consistent with previous [surveys](#), college-educated parents of young children

were more likely than non-college educated parents to prefer full-time center-based child care (22% vs.10%). Yet even for college-educated parents, center-based child care is not their preferred arrangement. Instead, the top-rated child care arrangements among college-educated parents was the model of “flexible work + shared child care” (28%), followed by one parent staying home full-time (24%). The “flexible work + shared child care” model was slightly more preferred by parents without a college degree (31%), and the share who preferred the stay-at-home model among non-college educated parents was higher than among college-educated parents (31% versus 24%).<sup>3</sup>

Parents’ preference for child care also differs by marital status. The “flexible work + shared child care” arrangement is especially favored by unmarried parents. Some 43% of unmarried parents of young children said this is the best child care arrangement, compared with 26% of married parents. The stay-at-home parent model is rated slightly higher by married parents than unmarried parents (29% versus 26%), making it the ideal child care arrangement among married parents with children under age 5. Both married and unmarried parents endorsed the full-time center-based child care model at a lower rate (14% versus 16%). The major difference between married parents and unmarried parents is in the preference for the arrangement where one parent stays at home part time and uses other types of part-time child care. Some 18% of married parents endorsed this model, compared with only 1% of

<sup>3</sup> The sample size for parents with children ages 0-4 is small (n=293); further breakdowns by parents’ gender were not conducted.

unmarried parents. This likely reflects the fact that this arrangement is not a realistic option for many unmarried parents, given the availability of part-time work and the lack of another parent in the household.

It is important to note that it is not just parents of children under age 5 who prefer the “flexible work + shared child care” model. Parents with older children, as well as the general public, like this model as well, even more strongly than parents of young children. Of all the adults ages 18-55 surveyed, 37% said this model is the best arrangement for families with young children under age 5. It is the most preferred model over one parent staying at home full-time (27%), relatives providing child care full time (14%), or one parent staying at home part time (12%). Only 8% of the public said that full-time center-based child care is the best arrangement for families with young children.

## **Conclusion**

*Washington Post* columnist Megan McArdle [recently wrote](#) that large-scale disasters, like global pandemics, can “function as a kind of reset button: knocking us out of our old ruts and opening up possibilities we never would have seen otherwise.” COVID-19 seems to have done just that for many parents—breaking open new possibilities that enable them to better prioritize what matters most to them.

These findings provide a window into what a better work and family world might look like for mothers and fathers. No one work situation and child care model fits all parents. Instead, what parents desire is access to work and child care situations that are responsive to their different situations and family needs. Some policy proposals have suggested expanding the role of center-based care to serve working parents’ needs, but polls show that the [two most-frequently cited locations](#) where parents want to see their children spend the bulk of time are either at home or at a faith-based child care provider.

The results from this IFS/Wheatley Institution survey suggest that both mothers and fathers want more opportunities to choose where and when they work so they can provide the kind of care situation they want for their children. The COVID-19 pandemic may prove an opportunity to reset how parents decide between those options—both now and for the long-term.

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## Appendix A: Survey questions

### ASK ALL:

IDEAL Considering everything, what would be the ideal situation for you—working full time, working part time, or not working for pay at all?

- 1 Full-time
- 2 Part-time
- 3 Not working for pay at all
- 9 Don't know/Refused (**VOL.**)

### ASK ALL:

IDEAL2 Has the COVID pandemic changed your preference for work, or not?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No

### ASK If YES (Ideal2= 1):

IDEAL3 Has the COVID pandemic made you more likely to prefer...

- 1 Full-time work
- 2 Part-time work
- 3 Not working for pay at all

### ASK IF WORKING PREFERRED (IDEAL=1,2):

IDEAL4 Has COVID made you more likely to prefer...

- 1 Working from home most of the time
- 2 Working from home about half the time
- 3 Working from the office most of the time

### ASK ALL:

**Childcare1:** What do you think is the best child care arrangement for families with babies/toddlers ages 0-4? [**Pick one**, Randomize items]

1. One parent stays home full time to care for child
2. One parent stays home part time and uses some other kind of child care part time
3. Relatives (such as grandparents) provide child care full time
4. Nanny cares for child full time
5. Family use center-based child care full-time
6. Both parents work flexible hours and share child care

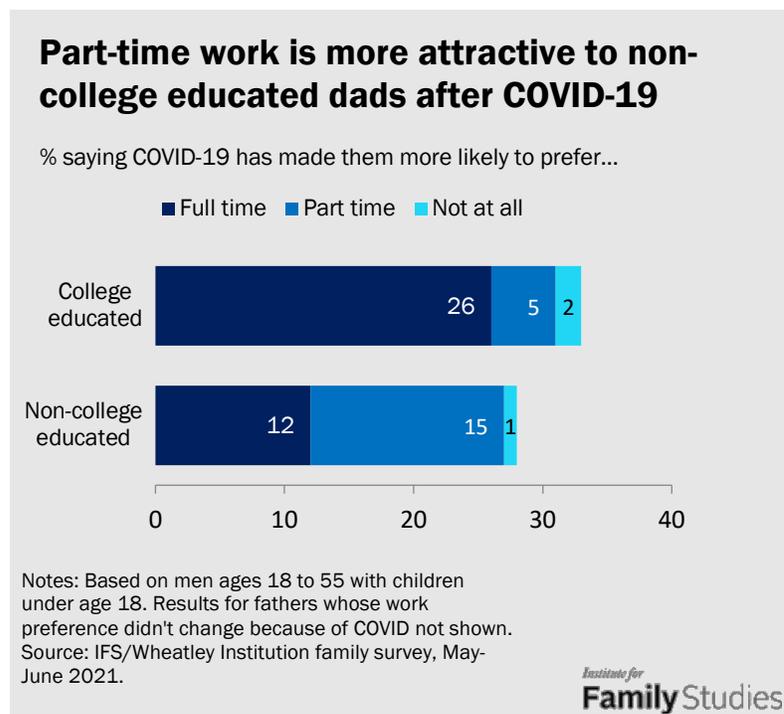
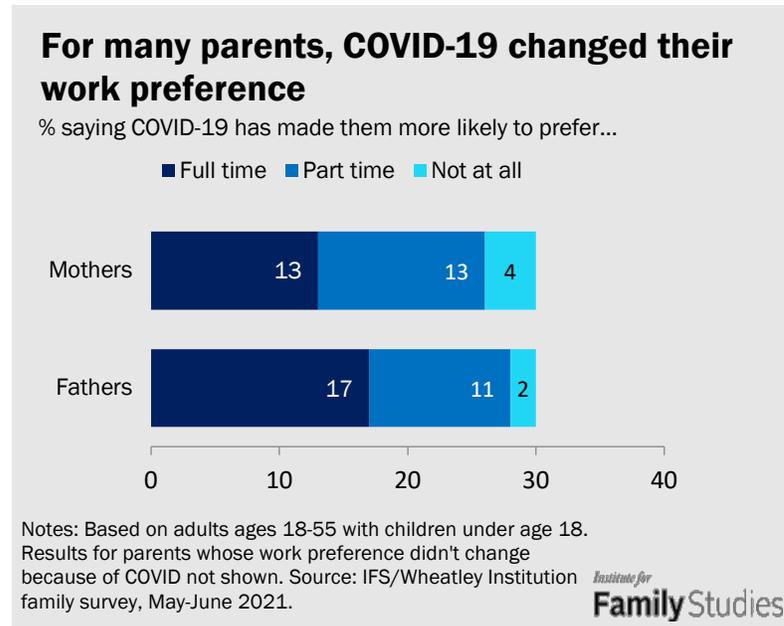
### ASK of those with children ages 0-4 at home:

**Childcare2:** Now think about your own child(ren) ages 0-4. Which of the following best describes your arrangement during the weekdays?

1. One parent stays at home full time
2. One parent stays home part time and uses some other kind of child care part time
3. Relatives (such as grandparents) provide child care full time
4. Nanny cares for child full time
5. Use center-based child care full time

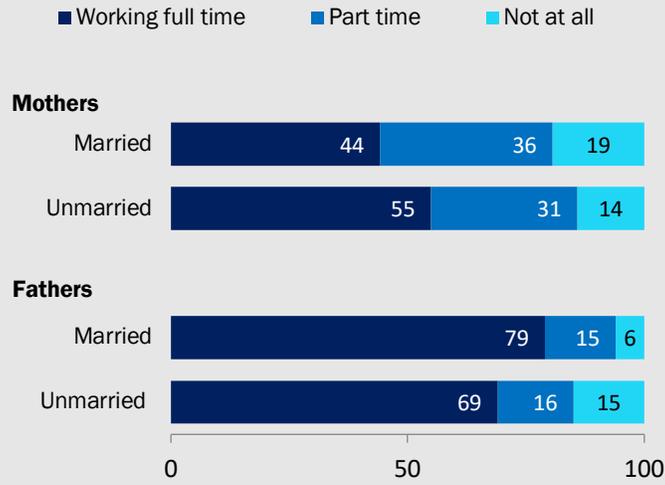
6. Both parents work flexible hours and share child care

Appendix B: Additional charts



## Moms and Dads' preference, by marital status

% saying...would be the ideal situation, considering everything



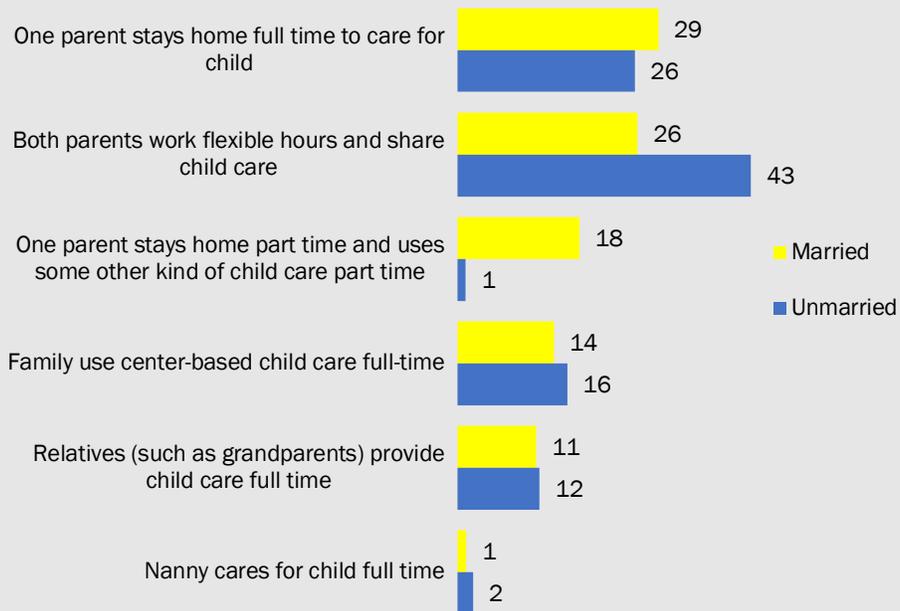
Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55 with children under age 18.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution family survey, May-June 2021.

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## Unmarried parents of young children especially favor the "flexible work+ shared child care" arrangement

% saying ...is the best child care arrangement for families with kids ages 0-4



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 55 with children ages 0-4.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institution family survey, May-June 2021.

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